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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AND POPULAR DISCOURSES ON HAZING IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL HOSTELS

Abstract

Despite hazing being illegal in South African education institutions since December 2002 and post 2002, newspapers and research reveal that it is still practised. It seems as if popular, rather than elitist opinion and debate or research findings perpetuate hazing practices. The aim of this article is to identify popular discourses on hazing in South Africa. This paper draws on the theories of cognitive dissonance and dominance. A content analysis of 26 letters to the editor on a specific hazing incident and its aftermath provides an empirical window into non-elite public debate on the topic. The study highlights the existence of conflicting popular discourses on hazing. These conflicting discourses centre on the individual and the newspaper which exposed the incident; the plight of hazers and their victims; the role of the school in addressing hazing; and hazing per se. It is concluded that hazing practices will continue as long as a non-elitist discourse in favour of hazing exists.

Keywords: content analysis, hazing, initiation, non-elitist discourse

Introduction

An investigation by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC, 2001) led to the report: *Regulations to Prohibit Initiation Practices in Schools* (RSA, 2002) by parliament during December 2002. These regulations stipulate that no principal, educator, or learner may be involved in hazing practices or any other actions resulting in the humiliation, degradation, harassment, assault, violation of the dignity, intimidation or maltreatment of learners. The gazettement of the notice received the support of teachers' trade unions, educational psychologists and members of the academe (Baloyi, 2002). Yet, post 2002 newspapers and research reveal that hazing is still practised in some South African education institutions.

Studies in the USA, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Greece, Iceland, Canada, India and Belgium found that hazing is a fairly common phenomenon (Allan & Madden, 2008; Huysamer, 2013). Although little research has been done on the topic within the South African context, hazing has occurred in South African schools and school hostels for more than a century (Huysamer, 2013; Huysamer & Lemmer, 2013; Potgieter, 2012). These practices are seldom questioned by the participants, educators and alumni, as the process is generally accepted as part of school 'tradition' (Huysamer & Lemmer, 2013). Huysamer and Lemmer (2013) also found that parents tend to reinforce the idea that school-based rituals are acceptable as they recall similar events from their school days, which, in their view, did them no harm. It therefore seems as if popular, rather than elitist opinion and debate or research findings perpetuate hazing practices in South African schools and school hostels.

In my quest to understand the continuation of hazing practices in South African education institutions despite strict regulations barring them, this paper aims to answer the following research question: *What are the popular discourses on hazing in South African schools and school hostels?* To answer this question I turn to letters to the editor on the topic. Mikhailova (2011, p. 524) calls letters to the editor “unobtrusive measures” providing “an empirical window into non-elitist public debates”. According to Mikhailova (2011), letters have been successfully used for the study of ethnic, racial and social conflicts in various countries. Letters to the editor tend to be sent by people who may have strong feelings or more extreme views about an issue than the average reader (Hull, 2001).

Concept clarification

Allan and Madden (2008, p. 2) define hazing as “any activity accepted from anyone joining a secondary school that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers them regardless of their willingness to participate in the activity”. This definition makes mention of two main ideas: Firstly, the implied negative consequences, such as humiliation, degradation, abuse and any forms of endangerment; this includes psychological, physical and sexual consequences. Secondly, the definition refers to the participant participating willingly or unwillingly. The latter is an important part of the definition, as the individual being hazed is always in favour of the ultimate consequence, namely becoming an accepted member of the group, but not necessarily part of the process (Huysamer, 2013). This ambiguity is also acknowledged in the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study.

Theoretical framework

To provide a theoretical framework for the phenomenon of hazing, this paper draws on the theories of cognitive dissonance and dominance. Cognitive dissonance comes about when a person holds two opposing views concurrently. This causes tension within the individual and, as a result, the individual adapts or changes one of his/her views in an attempt to reduce the internal tension caused by the opposing views. When a victim of hazing is for example, forced into a degrading act during hazing, he/she rationalises the experience by convincing him/herself that ‘it was not so bad’, thus reducing the conflicting tension between his/her identity as an intelligent person and his/her participation in a demeaning act. He/she consequently regard the group with which he/she seeks affiliation positively (Cimino, 2011; Huysamer & Lemmer, 2013). In contrast to the cognitive dissonance theory that suggests that hazing promotes group solidarity, is the dominance theory. The idea that hazers are seeking to establish or reaffirm a dominant position with respect to the newcomers, is common (Cimino, 2011). Nuwer’s (2000, p. 20) definition elevates dominance as a characteristic of hazing. According to him, hazing involves “any activity that requires new members to show subservience to old members”.

Research methodology

This study is situated in an interpretivist research paradigm and focuses on individual letter writers, and not an objective understanding of hazing (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2011).

In order to convey an extensive picture of readers of newspapers' views on hazing, news and in-depth opinionated articles, editorials, and letters to the editor related to hazing in South African schools and school hostels were published in South African newspapers since the publication of the regulations prohibiting hazing. This occurred during December 2001 up to 31 December 2012 and I retrieved them from the SAMedia database (<http://www.samedia.uovs.ac.za/>). On 1 November 2013 full-text keyword searchers ('hazing', 'initiation', 'education' and 'schools' were the keywords) yielded 78 items related to hazing within a school and/or school hostel context. Among the 78 items, 27 were letters to the editor. Twenty-six of these letters focus on a specific hazing incident and its aftermath. I therefore decided to limit my data analysis to these 26 letters. All these letters were addressed to the editors of the *Star* or *Saturday Star*.

Henning et al.'s (2011) guidelines for qualitative content analysis were used to reduce, condense and group the content of the 26 letters. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, I described the research process in relative detail and gave rich, thick descriptions to allow transferability (Henning et al., 2011).

The hazing incident and its aftermath

On the night of 2 February 2009, 14 Grade 11 boys were allegedly pulled out of their beds at Druce hostel, at Parktown Boys' High School, by 12 Grade 12 boys. They were beaten with cricket bats, whips and golf clubs and ordered to rub an embrocation (Deep Heat) on their genitals. These activities were apparently part of the rituals 'welcoming' them as senior residents of Druce hostel. After complaints by a Grade 11 boy's father, the incident was investigated by the head of the school hostel. At a disciplinary hearing all 12 boys admitted guilt. They were sentenced to a number of sanctions, including the removal of privileges, given detentions and maintenance work, together with a final written warning. They were also instructed to undergo counselling. Ms Pene Kimber, the mother of another Grade 11 boy, was not satisfied with the way the school handled the incident. After communicating with the principal in this regard, she transferred her boy to another school. She also laid criminal charges against the Grade 12 boys and three educators. On 2 June 2009 the Grade 12 boys were arrested on the school grounds. They were charged with assault with intent to commit grievous bodily harm. Nearly two years after the charges were first levelled against the boys, the case was struck off the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court roll. It seems as if the case was struck off the role because it has been postponed 12 times previously and the court could not keep postponing it (Clarke, 2009; Evans, 2009; Serrao, 2009a; Serrao, 2010; Staff Reporter, 2010). Initially, three educators were also due to be arrested, but at the last minute the warrants were not executed (Serrao, 2009b). Kimber not only laid charges against the 12 boys and three educators, but also reported the incident to the Department of Education. She argued that the principal and head of the school hostel did not act in *loco parentis*. The Department decided not to continue disciplinary hearings against the principal after his retirement. The head of the school hostel was found not guilty of neglecting his duties (Saturday Star, 2010). No evidence could be found on the results of the disciplinary hearing of the third educator.

Findings

A reading of the 26 letters to the editor reveals opposing discourses. In six of the letters the actions and traditions of the school where the hazing occurred are defended, and there is compassion for the hazers (who were arrested and were facing criminal charges at the time the letters were written). These authors condemn Kimber for laying charges against the 12 boys and slam the *Star* for carrying the story. Most of the letter writers (76.9%) however, have compassion for the mother and hail her and her son as persons who acted bravely. The role of the *Star* in exposing the events is also commended. In these letters hazing per se, the conduct of the 12 boys and the actions of the school are criticised.

Theme 1: Ms Kimber, the victim's mother and plaintiff

Kimber is a central figure in nearly all the letters to the editor. She is either hailed as a brave person who stood for what she believes in or shunned as a vengeful person in pursuit of publicity. In a severe attack against Kimber, Murray (2009, p. 20) calls her the *Star*'s "heroine" and "holier-than-thou". Stopford (2009, p. 16) is also upfront about her dislike for Kimber: "In my view there is something unsavoury about Kimber's pursuit of publicity. The problem is Kimber wants to define and dictate the dialogue as if she is the only parent who has the answers." Stopford (2009, p. 16) ends her letter with the following question: "Where will her vengeful campaign end?" Lopes (2009, p. 20) suggests that Kimber is an unfit mother who is pursuing her personal vendetta at the cost of her son ("Look carefully what you are doing to your own son. ... Why and for whom are you doing this?"). Letters at the other end of the continuum applaud Kimber. Three examples will suffice: "Congratulations to Pene Kimber and her brave son for their gritty determination Every now and again such people come to the fore and make a difference" (Flint, 2009, p. 20); "Pene Kimber has my unqualified support" (Oliphant, 2009, p. 19) and "Pene Kimber, I salute you for your courage" (Pompa, 2009, p. 19).

Theme 2: The plight of the hazers

At the core of the critique against Kimber is her laying criminal charges against the 12 boys. Several of the letters to the editor consequently attack her, but also appeal to her to withdraw the charges. In these letters the plight of the alleged perpetrators forms an important theme. In a letter addressed to Kimber, Lopes (2009, p. 20) creates compassion for the hazers ("they are minors, children in the eyes of the law. They made a mistake and were disciplined"). Smit (2009, p. 10) also addresses Kimber: "You seem to condone these youngsters receiving criminal records for life. Surely you must realise the impact of such punishment". He begs her: "Please do not push for criminal records; it is permanent, and anyone sentencing a child for life is suspect". In response to the letters suggesting that Kimber is destroying the future of the 12 boys, Berman (2009, p. 13) argues that "Pene Kimber is not "destroying their future. They have done a very good job of that themselves by choosing to act like thugs and break the law". Forbes (2009) and Pompa (2009) support this line of argument. Whilst Prior (2009, p. 18) is in accord with the view of the previous two authors; namely, that the perpetrators should take responsibility for their actions, he partially exonerates the hazers: "I think they are also victims of a system, brainwashed to believe that because it is a tradition, their actions are acceptable and right". He therefore pleads with her to drop the charges.

Theme 3: The victims of hazing

The notion that hazing is character building and part of growing up is supported by Smit (2009). He critiques those who speak out against hazing. Whereas Smit (2009) suggests that the anti-hazing lobbyists are spineless, Flint (2009, p. 20) refers to the victim who dared to break the code of silence as a “brave boy”. He condemns victims who refuse to speak up and consequently perpetuate hazing. The theory that hazing generates group solidarity (Cimino, 2011) is supported by Murray (2009, p. 20) who suggests that those who are speaking out against hazing may be banned from the privileges of being an alumnus of a prestigious school. He warns Kimber that her “son will be persona non grata forever” among the alumni of the school.

Theme 4: The role of the school in addressing the hazing incident

Regulations to Prohibit Initiation Practices in Schools (RSA, 2002) places the responsibility on the school governing body (SGB), the school management team and staff to prevent hazing from taking place. The regulation also stipulates that if hazing practices come to light, the SGB has to take action to prevent this from happening again. It is therefore understandable that the letter writers would turn to the conduct of the SGB and the principal and staff in their evaluation of the incident. With the exception of a letter by the principal of Parktown Boys’ High School in which he explained “how we dealt with the alleged initiation abuse” (Clarke, 2009, p. 18) and Stopford (2009), who wrote on behalf of the parent body of the school, all the letters that made reference to the conduct of the principal and his staff condemn the way the incident was handled (Gibson, 2009; Melloy, 2009). The principal is called “wholly unrepentant” (Flint, 2009, p. 20) and “undeserving of the job” (Jackson, 2009, p. 18). Clark’s (2009) and Stopford’s (2009) letters explain in relative detail what the school had done to address the allegations by Kimber. They thus acquit the school of any blame or neglect. The aim of this study is not to identify so-called ‘truths’. I will therefore not juxtapose the opposing explanations of how the school conducted itself.

Theme 5: Hazing per se

The letter writers’ views on hazing per se can also be placed at opposite ends of the scale. On one side there are those who, for example, describe hazing as a practice that uses “public humiliation as a tool of ‘social cohesion’ to enforce conformity” (Forbes, 2009, p. 10) and call it a “medieval practice” which is in contravention to “modern societal norms of civilised behaviour” (Flint, 2009, p. 20). Caenazzo (2009, p. 18) writes about the circle of violence perpetuated by hazing: “the victims are either mentally scarred or decide that to overcome their feelings of inferiority generated by their own torture, wait until it is their turn to inflict similar or worse horrors on their juniors (and later in life on anybody deemed weaker than themselves)”. Caenazzo’s (2009, p. 18) rejection of the notion that hazing is character building, resonates with Prior’s (2009, p. 18) view. Sewall (2009, p. 19) is of the opinion that hazing does not have a place in a country that has a “humane constitution that places emphasis on the dignity of the individual”. He believes that the underlying motivation for hazing is to smother “individuality” and turn out young men who are unable to think “out of the box of their narrow conformity to some dubious creed or ethics”. The above critique against hazing supports the theory that dominance is a core characteristic of hazing.

On the other end of the scale, we find letter writers who justify hazing for the 'greater good'; namely, for newcomers to be initiated into the traditions of and welcomed as members of an elitist group. Whereas the anti-hazing writers feed into the dominance theory, proponents of hazing inadvertently confirm the cognitive dissonance theory. Smit (2009, p. 10) attacks those who speak out against hazing: "To the kids attending schools that practise initiation, my advice is to ask your parents to remove you if you do not wish to be included. You have no right to change an institution. If it is such a bad practice then the school will close itself with its own actions". Several letter writers refer to the school's proud tradition as justification for the initiation of the Grade 11s. Lopes (2009, p. 20) writes for example: "We need to look carefully at the school's track record, and at the members of society that it has educated and the role they play in our country". Murray (2009, p. 20) supports this view and makes reference to the "thousands of old boys ... which do this country proud". Smit (2009, p. 10) refers to "fine schools [that] mould boys into successful young men". In response to the view that hazing is a prerequisite for 'moulding' boys into successful men, Clark (2009, p. 18) writes that at his alma mater the newcomers are "welcomed with a handshake and a friendly greeting" and "we all turned out just fine".

Theme 6: The role of the media in exposing incidence of hazing

The *Star* was the first newspaper to report on the hazing of the Grade 11 boys. They were contacted by Kimber. As a leading Gauteng newspaper, it is understandable that the bulk of the news reports and all the letters to the editor were published in this newspaper, and its weekend edition (*Saturday Star*). A few of the letters to the editor either reproached the *Star* for reporting on the incident – and thus bringing the school in disrepute – or praising the *Star* on exposing the incident. Murray (2009, p. 20) criticises the *Star* for carrying the story: "the Parktown story fits into your framework of a semi-gutter press". Stopford (2009, p. 16) suggests that it is the *Star*'s intention, with its bad publicity, to bring the school to its knees. Oliphant (2009, p. 19) does not share the view of the previously quoted authors. According to him "the *Star* did not fabricate sensation; it merely reflected a sensational event". Flint (2009, p. 20) hails the *Star* for "giving prominence to the sordid affair".

Conclusion

Letters to the editor confirm the existence of conflicting popular discourses on hazing. The supporters of hazing slam those individuals who dare to speak out against it and/or expose it. They are portrayed as vindictive, of questionable character and unfit (as parents). The integrity of newspapers that carried the story is also questioned. Emphasis is, however, placed on the proud tradition of elitist schools and it is suggested that hazing traditions are one of the fundamental reasons why the alumni of these schools are leaders in their respective fields and forever loyal to one another and their alma mater. This discourse feeds into the cognitive dissonance theory: solidarity with the group revokes all humiliation and abuse. Those who cannot handle the hazing, or break the code of silence surrounding this tradition, are thus not worthy to become part of the elitist, dominant group. Those responsible for the hazing, on the other hand, are seen as children upholding a proud

tradition. Proponents of hazing are therefore opposed to any harsh chastisement that might negatively impact on the prospect of these future leaders.

This study identified a second discourse on hazing. Letter writers who speak out against hazing emphasise the inappropriateness of this practice in modern, democratic societies. Those who break the code of silence are praised as brave individuals who are willing to fight for what is right, instead of succumbing to the pressures of and vilification by the dominant group. A duality is present in the second discourse with regard to the position of the seniors responsible for hazing. Whilst some argue that there should be a zero tolerance, judgemental approach towards them, others support a restorative approach.

Hazing is prevalent in some South African schools and school hostels despite being prohibited since 2002. Clandestine hazing practices will continue under the guise of tradition as long as popular discourse in favour of hazing exists. The uncritical acceptance and defence of dehumanising and illegal practices perpetuate violence and disrespect in a country with claims to have one of the most liberal constitutions in the world.

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